

The Vampire Strikes Back

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

Before Guetersloh-stationed developer Magic Bytes came of age, producing the erotic android games, Blue Angel 69 and Sexy Droids, leery hospital management sim, Biing!: Sex, Intrigue and Scalpels, and the strip puzzler, Penthouse Hot Numbers, they gifted Bram Stoker fans with the 1988 Dracula-slaying trial, Vampire's Empire. Yes, I *did* say 'erotic android games'. 'Games' with an *s*, as in the plural. That happened, it's on record.



It's a novel, puzzle platformer released for the Amiga, Atari ST, Commodore 64, MSX, and ZX Spectrum, published by Floridians DigiTek Software in the US, and 'Dee-dars' Gremlin in the UK. That's what Sheffield folk are known as, honest.



The staff roster incorporated coders, Gisbert Siegmund, Jorg Prenzing, and Michael Oelze, graphicians, Bernard Morell, Rolf Lakamper and Stefan Rissmann, and musician, Georg Brandt.

Van Helsing's journal forms the basis for the game's premise and mechanics, the relevant extracts having been included alongside the bafflingly translated half-page of instructions found in the manual.

You play as Dr Van Helsing whose task as ever is to vanquish chief blood-sucker, Dracula. Stabbing him through the ticker with a wooden stake would be far too simple so to ramp up the challenge and keep it interesting we must align a series of mirrors in a 160 screen castle (well, technically Dracula's Transylvanian des-res) to project a beam of deadly light into the Count's lair where his casket resides.

"Today I returned from a most horrifying journey. After what has seemed like a lifetime of searching, I have discovered the underground lair of the Vampire King, Dracula himself. It is located deep within the Transylvanian forests, where most mortals dare not go. It had been many years since the death of my mother, and I had plenty of time to plan my attack as I searched for His lair. I had long known that the way to defeat this (Dracula) was the power of light. This was difficult because He was always deep within his lair by the first light of day. So my strategy was to place mirrors throughout his underground fortress and reflect the sunlight down into the vault itself, thus ridding the world of its most evil foe."

Van Helsing's journal, 15th June 1744

Our backup plan is crystal balls, deployed to catch and redirect the rays. In fact, you can ignore the mirrors altogether if they're not your cup of tea... or should that be chalice of blood?

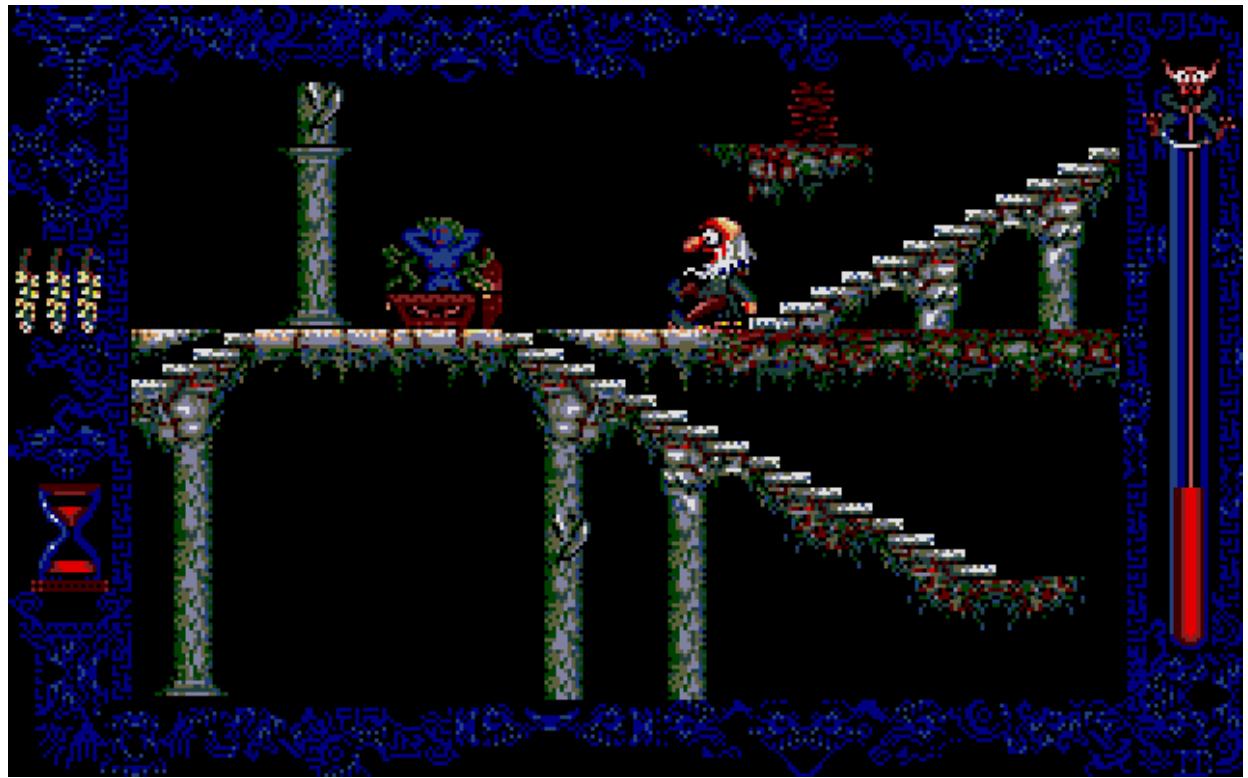
"Rapture! Oh, how my soul sings! For I have found a way to control the light. For years I have searched for a method of guiding sunlight into the bowels of the earth. What irony that in these modern times, someone such as myself should resort to sorcery and witchcraft. I must say that even I was somewhat hesitant upon hearing the old gypsy woman speak of a 'magic ball' that could be used to direct sunlight. To think that such a device exists! Although when I stumbled upon it, it was used for nothing more than carnival illusions, I cannot help but think that its original purpose was the eradication of vampires. I now have the courage and method to again venture into the Count's lair.

Now the adventure begins..."

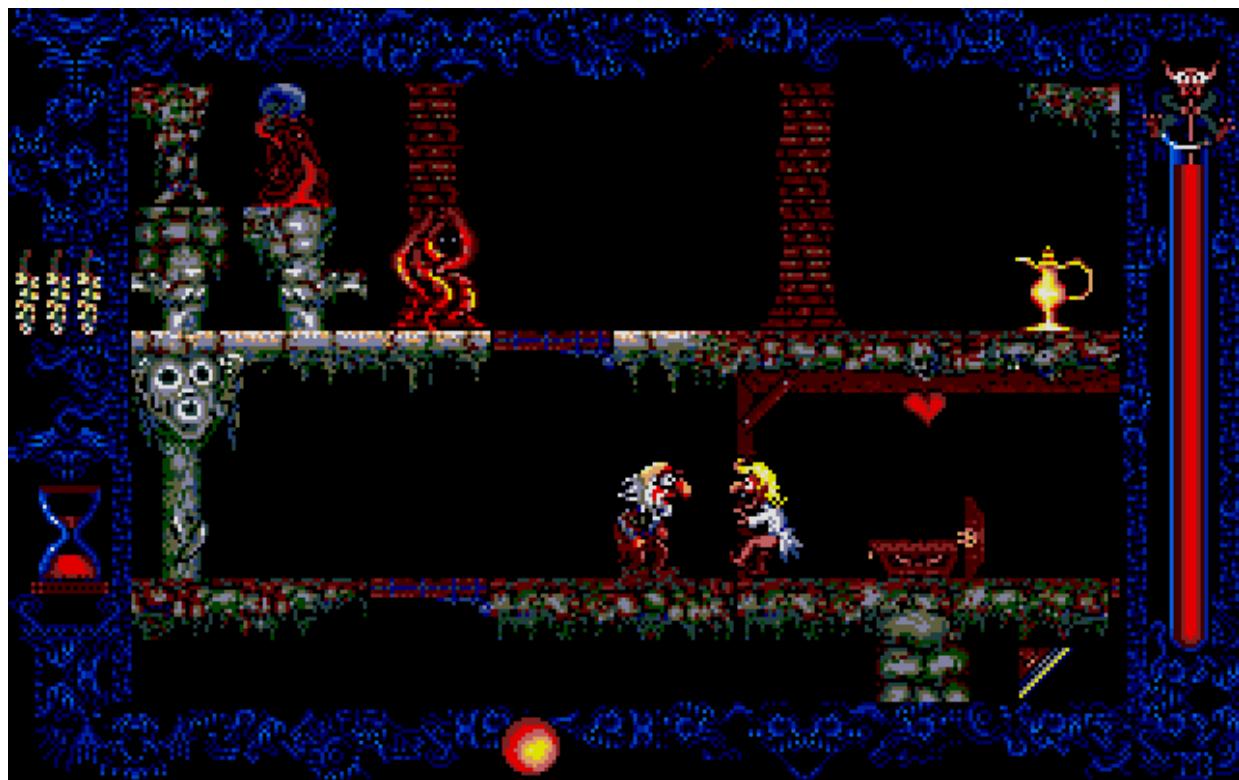
Van Helsing's journal, 3rd April 1753

"So where have Magic Bytes gone wrong with Vampire's Empire? For a start, each level is a huge maze of platforms to be negotiated by an extremely wayward string of ping-pong balls (apparently a ray of light). It's hardly worth using the mirrors, because by the time you've selected the right one, the ray has bounced off the top of the screen never to be seen again. Directing the light with the crystal ball is no better - after briefly moving in the right direction, the ray thinks better of it and chooses somewhere else to go. Hence, the chances of getting the ray and Dracula onto the exit block would take the patience of a saint and more perseverance than any sane person possesses. The awful control problems the player has with Van Helsing only make things worse, so you switch off long before you've got your teeth into the game."

20% - Zzap! (June 1988)



As you explore the smooth-scrolling milieu you encounter the former Prince's minions; naked blue harpies, sleepwalking maids and demons who emerge from stray coffins to hamper your efforts.



"However, I did not anticipate the horror of the half-human creatures I discovered there, ready to fight to the death to defend the Count. There are horrible looking monsters with enormous heads and gaping maws. Even worse are the young blonde creatures with curly hair who crave your very soul. I encountered a great number of 'ordinary' vampires (Vampirus Trivius), but I was quite able to handle them with the garlic. But perhaps the most terrible of all are the female demons wearing lots of practically nothing, who prance about in the halls and caverns, showing everyone their great big...ahem, attractions, and even I had great (and very embarrassing) difficulties not to submit to their spells. I had not counted on this army of the undead, and I was unable to control the force of the light. Truly, I say to you, I was fortunate to escape with my very life. However, I cannot give up! For I am the famous vampirologist, Dr. Van Helsing! Or am I just an old fool?"

I must find a way to control the light..."

Van Helsing's journal, 15th June 1744



Much like his Royal Biteyness these can be deterred by wafting aromatic garlic cloves under their conks. One of his undead servants is particularly well-endowed in this department so you'd imagine would be exceptionally vulnerable to the garlic projectiles you fire from your eyes for no discernible reason. Although that's hardly a unique Achilles heel; I've been known to pass out having been breathed on by a piquant garlic-munching fiend who has yet to discover the wonders of toothpaste.

"The Vampire's laughter gnawed at my being and I became even more incensed. Having thrown all available utensils I was reduced to pelting it with lettuce, potatoes and onions. It smiled amidst my fruitless attack. Suddenly it paused. Its nostrils twitched as its quick and

calculating black eyes searched the room for something it appeared to smell. Garlic! The pungent odour overwhelmed me. A great noise echoed all around me, enveloping me, washing through my body. There was a sound of horrible agony then the creature was gone. And I felt the most extraordinary pleasure..."

Van Helsing's journal, 12th February 1693

Genie's lamps can be scooped up to replenish your blood count energy meter, and erm, there's not much more to it than that really. That'll be twenty quid, please.

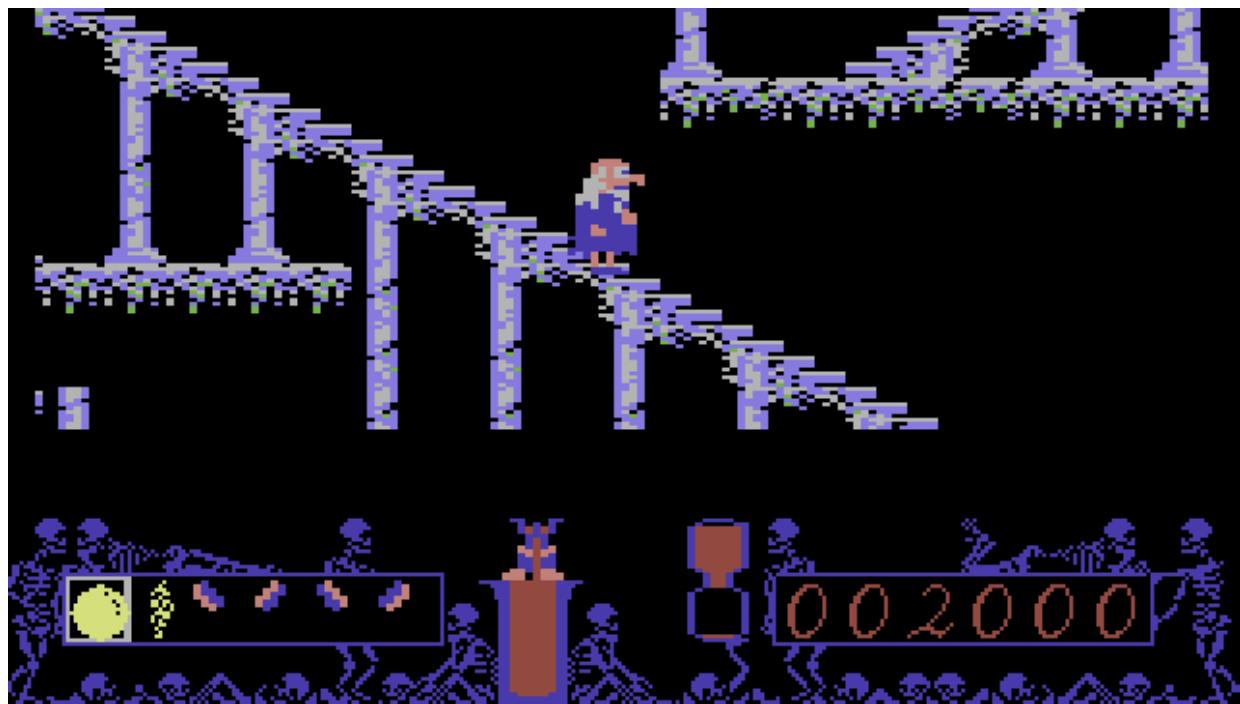


"Beneath the uninspired graphics lurks a decent puzzle game, which unfortunately is never given the chance to escape. The backdrops are badly drawn and gaudily coloured, leading to confusion because all the locations are indistinguishable, and the sprites are blocky and poorly animated. The scrolling is activated too near to

the edge of the screen and consequently, some monsters are impossible to avoid because Van Helsing always slides to a halt. It's also unbelievably frustrating to set up the mirrors only to find one misplaced... Vampire's Empire Is far from amusing."

20% - Zzap! (June 1988)





The overly sensitive controls are an encumbrance to say the least. You travel at the speed of light and screech to a skidding halt rather than instantly due to the Gomez-like inertia.

Your default means of descending the multitude of staircases is to take a Sonic style tumble head over heels, landing flat on your back at the bottom. It would be a neat time-saving mechanism if that had been a concern. It's not in effect - there's no countdown to wrangle with at all, which makes a refreshing change.

Slides are a more useful shortcut to the floor below without posing a trip hazard. Old Fangface must have had those installed for the foam party raves he's notorious for hosting. Remember, it was in the original novel? Pfft, your memory is shocking.

Our decrepit, protagonist will right himself eventually, though it's far quicker to push up with the joystick and do it

for him. It appears the designer was alluding to Van Helsing's incessantly debilitating arthritis here.

Aside from your Go-Go Gadget garlic peepers you can always fall back on your legs, by booting assailants with them; a manoeuvre ideal for exterminating rats.



A number of key differences between the various iterations of the game are apparent. Whilst the Amiga version features continuous scrolling, the others employ a flick-screen display.

Vampire Empire's box refers to the inclusion of "four elaborate game phases". A tad hyperbolic and what they actually mean are levels, yet the Amiga and Atari ST edition only offers one uninterrupted rolling stage. In any case, on the C64 the separate levels only really amount to colour palette switches. Don't expect any diversity in the gameplay mechanics. 160 screens worth of Vampire stalking shenanigans are to be found in the 16-bit games versus the 8-bit's hefty 240.

"According to the German programmers these differences are due to a much harder screen layout and they believe the 16-bit players may require a little help.

The thoughtfulness of the Amiga programmers is further demonstrated by excellent, if quite disgusting, sound effects and genuinely comic graphics. With such immaculate presentation, the game's humour is perfectly conveyed."

79% - The Games Machine (May 1988)

Caskets harbouring Dracula's gruesome cronies are dotted around the castle in the 16-bit renditions, though are completely absent from the 8-bit editions. Instead, foes materialise out of the ether without any foreshadowing.

On the 8-bit platforms the game winds down when we finally reach Nosferatu's resting place and shepherd the ray of light into it. A congratulatory screen ensues culminating with the Latin phrase, "nunc est bibendum"; a line taken from 'Cleopatra Ode' written by Roman lyric poet, Horace, in 23 BC. It translates to "now is the time for drinking"... and who would argue with such sagely game-ending wisdom?

"Vampire's Empire is a game that could have been very good. As it is, unfortunately, it's not. The cartoony graphics and the somewhat original idea may exact a certain amount of interest, there's nothing really there to hold the attention."

"Cute idea and great graphics but it doesn't hang together."

58% - Sinclair User issue 78 (September 1988)



Over on the 16-bit systems, it appears that the developers started the booze up prematurely, forgetting to include any kind of finale at all, not even a scrap of 'well done' text. We only know the mission has been accomplished because the game resets for us to have another *stab* at it. I can't imagine Dracula will take that lightly; I expect he'll do his utmost to raise the *stakes*.

Speaking of unfinished games, an alternative cracked ST version exists that appears to be a work-in-progress that was leaked prior to the implementation of the light beam doohickey, making a perplexing game doubly so.

"The packaging suggests there are four elaborate game-phases. I think I have only seen the first, due mainly to the quirksome controls. Beautifully depicted screens and well-used music sets the horrific atmosphere perfectly. I would, however, remind anyone thinking of adding this game to their collection that is somewhat difficult to control. Still, the game reminded me of earlier Spectrum titles available from Ultimate. So, if you want a real challenge reminiscent of those early games, you could do far worse than buy Vampire's Empire."

65% - ST Action (June 1988)

Like much of Magic Bytes' fare, Vampire's Empire is enticingly well drawn and animated with an offbeat, whimsical attention to detail, which somewhat helps to mask a deficiency in the gameplay department. Only *somewhat* mind you. Chaperoning an unruly light wave is hardly the most entralling concept on which to hang an entire game. As a bonus sub-jaunt within a more action-oriented vehicle, it may have provided welcome respite. Otherwise, the tedious chore wears thin very quickly, with zero payoff by way of mitigation.

That said, the developers should be commended for trying something original while most of the competition were playing it safe with production line, carbon-copy platformers and shmups.

Vampire's Empire may not have set the world ablaze, nevertheless, it's innovation like this that leads to the breakthrough of new genres and novel twists on tried and tested ones. Had it not been for developers who are prepared to take a risk we'd all still be playing Pong clones.

I'm almost certain I'll never return to Vampire's Empire. Even so, I still get a kick out of knowing it exists, and that Magic Bytes went the extra mile to research the obscure back story of their hero and translate it in such an endearing way to the tiny bedroom telly.